

UU Identity: A Politics of Respect
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One of the things my father taught me when I was growing up was that in polite society, you never, ever talk about religion or politics. At least, not with people who don't already share your opinions on the matter. I am guessing that some of you may have been taught the same thing. It's kind of the avoidance method of getting along with people.

And if you were taught that, as I was, you may also think that politics should not be preached from the pulpit; that anything in the political realm should be tabu, in order not to offend anyone who may not agree on the political stance of the preacher. And it is true that as a Non-profit Corporation, our church and by extension our minister must never take a partisan stand. We must not lobby for or against a candidate for public office or a particular political party.

But what we can do, indeed, what we **MUST** do, is take a stand on the moral issues of our day. In September I went to Boston to participate in a clergy demonstration on the steps of the Capital of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Some of you were there, too. A proclamation, signed by clergy of many faith traditions, was read and then presented to our state representatives. It said, "homelessness is a **MORAL** issue; income inequality is a **MORAL** issue; healthcare, education, hunger, mass incarceration, and many more, are **MORAL** issues." And what is religion about, if not to grapple with the moral issues of our day?

As some of you know, I was suddenly called away when my father passed away, a couple of weeks ago. I flew back to Denver, to my childhood home, where I stayed with my sister for a week. It was really important and good for us to be together for that time. She has been our dad's primary, live-in caregiver for the past five years, and she is, as one would expect, weary beyond words, and adrift now without a pressing need to keep going every day.

She picked me up at the airport, and on our drive "home" engaged in some casual conversation. Casual, that is, until the subject of politics came up. "Be careful," she said, "I voted for Trump."

Now, I am not much given to letting elephants sit in the middle of my relationships. And I especially didn't want one sitting between my sister and me as we processed our sense of loss, the preciousness of our father's life, and facing the future now without his love, sweetness, and sense of humor.

And, I heard my sister's "Be Careful." I am tender, I am raw, I am hurting; please do be careful not to further wound me. If you fail to respect all of me, including my political choice, something may be damaged beyond repair. I need you to know, without me having to tell you, that I had good, honorable, and responsible reasons for supporting one candidate over another in the election.

As, indeed, she did. Because I found it within myself to approach her with respect for her motives, her intelligence – she has a lot! – and her basic goodness as a human being. We see eye to eye on much more than we differ on, and she has some good points that I need to pay attention to. We reached a place where we could teach each other as we looked at the elephant from different points of view.

But I have been thinking about why she even felt she needed to say, “Be careful.” I have never actually had a difficult or hurtful political discussion with her before; we have both been extremely busy and living far apart for most of our adult lives. I have known she is Republican, and that’s fine with me. She has known I am now a Democrat, and that has always been fine with her. So, what has changed?

I think that what has changed is that the public discourse has become more and more demeaning and nasty. And what happens is that we notice when “they” say something rude, or make a joke at our expense, or assume that we are either uninformed or downright hostile toward us. We are much less likely to notice how rude and dismissive we often sound to those who disagree with us.

We talk about the divisions in our culture lately; we proclaim that civic dialogue has become increasingly uncivil. Unfortunately, we often forget that we ourselves tend to contribute to that. Whether we are Republicans or Democrats or Independents, we are still human. And as humans, we so often label, vilify, or laugh at others who disagree with us.

And guess what? I have done this. I probably will again, too, because I am human. I am aware that I “like” Facebook posts making fun of double chins, short fingers, clothing, hair, and personality traits of people in public service whose politics and policies I disagree with. I justify my behavior to myself by thinking, “I need a laugh right now.”

But I am also going to try to remember the pain when something I am invested in is mocked or dismissed. When feminists are branded as “man haters.” When President Obama was called a monkey. When the bulk of the scientific community is dismissed as “conspirators” whose object is to hobble business interests. These things are hurtful and maddening to me.

I’m going to try to remember my sister’s voice, asking me to be careful of her feelings. I am going to try very hard to stop myself from adding to the un-civility, the disrespect, that has become increasingly common in our world.

I’m going to try to remember the rule I imposed on my children when they were growing up: NO NAMECALLING. None. No exceptions. In my house, if you said, “Liar!” to your brother, you had to go back and practice saying it nicely. “That is a lie,” or “That’s not true” or even, “You don’t know what you are talking about” were acceptable. Calling him a liar was not.

Because it's OK to call out bad or hurtful behavior. In fact, for people to truly get along, we MUST bring hurtful behavior to the attention of the one whose behavior is hurting us, or others. If we say nothing when we or someone else is being hurt, we become complicit in the wrongdoing. AND, if we have *any* chance of being *heard*, our words must come wrapped in respect.

I know how hard that can be, especially when we are angry. It is OK to be angry, folks. Certainly, we have much to be angry about, for ourselves and for others. But, especially when we are angry, it is so important to always be gentle. We are a gentle, angry people. Write it on your doorposts, and teach it to your children. Angry, AND gentle. Respectful of the humanity of others.

I remember, as a kid, watching *The Wizard of Oz* on television. It came on once a year, and we made sure nothing interfered with it! It helped shape the worldview of an entire generation – maybe more. When I think about a politics of respect, I think of how the lion came out growling, teeth bared, scaring Dorothy half to death. Instead of telling him off and leaving him behind, Dorothy spent time with the lion and heard his story, and understood and had compassion for his struggles. Come along with me, she offered, we will find solutions to our problems together. We have a lot in common!

This is the kind of respect I am talking about: remembering that everyone, all of us and all of “them,” EVERYONE has worth and dignity, and is entitled to respect, even if, at the same time, we oppose certain of their views or values.

This does not mean never laughing at all. Sometimes we have to laugh, so we don't cry! But there is a difference between laughing at an absurdity and laughing at a personality. There is a difference between laughing at an action and laughing at a person. Just as there is a difference – a vital difference – between resisting a policy or a law or a practice, and saying, “Resist ___[that guy]!”

Rather than oppose and resist a particular person or party, let's be bold on the issues. Let's talk about the common good. Let's oppose human rights violations, not only overseas but here in the United States, as well. As UUs, let's proudly affirm the worth and dignity of all people. Join with UUA President Peter Morales, who has signed the “Declaration of Conscience,” which says “We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.”

Gil Rendle, in his book *To Re-Enchant the World*, points out that UU congregations are engaged in a grand experiment, one that might truly have the power to change our world for the better. That is because we affirm the worth and dignity of all, and vow to support each other in our different spiritual paths. I would add, including the place where our spiritual paths take us politically. Including the heartless tin people, the people we suspect must have straw in place of brains, the people who are so scared that they attack us.

Let us be tender with each other. Let us reach out for common ground. Let this be a safe space to voice our different perspective on life, both spiritually and politically. May all of us, all of the time, practice respect, even, or especially, when we disagree. May we be gentle but firm in our sometimes angry opposition to policies that harm people. May we teach it to our children. May we practice Beloved Community, in our congregation, in our larger community, in our civic engagement, on our Facebook pages; everywhere. May we participate in the Democratic process, in the political process, in whatever way we can. And let us practice, always, a Politics of Respect.